

The Horta-Osório Collection of Antique Chess Sets

Volume 1: India



- Photos and descriptions of António's world-class antique chess sets, boards, and pieces from the subcontinent of India
- An expert team of chess historians explains the intricacies of the chess sets and the geopolitical circumstances in which these historical marvels were made
- 424 pages, 212 photos, 68 illustrations

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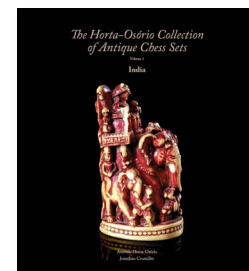
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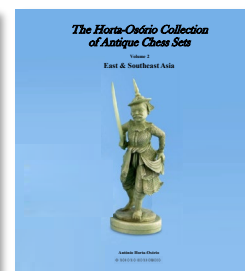
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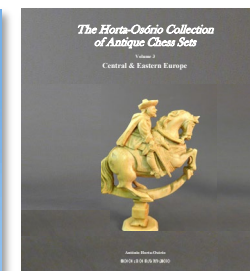
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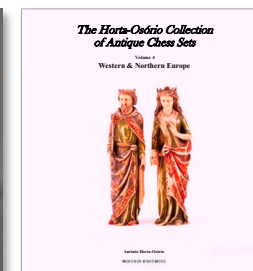
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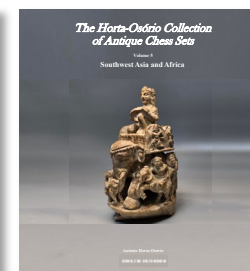
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Two other sets from Bengal, carved in local styles different from the John Company style, include a simpler type of boat which might be identified as a *pansi* (also spelled *pan-sway*). *Pansis* are light river vessels with a single pavilion or cabin used to transport cargo or passengers (fig. 8 / 8026). In the first set, dating from the 19th century, the boats appear long and elegant with a pavilion in the center and animal heads at the stern and bow (fig. 9 / 1390).

Similar designs can be found in numerous terracotta reliefs decorating village temples across Bengal and thus reflect an everyday lived reality (fig. 10 / 8027).¹⁴ As is standard in Bengali chess, the boat takes the place of the rook, but where John Company sets usually have camels for bishops, this set has elephants, differentiated by their single rider from the two riders of the queen elephant and the three riders of the king elephant. The foot-soldiers are unarmed and sitting on their haunches in typical Indian fashion with the knees pressed against the chest and the backside almost touching the ground. The two sides are identical except for the red and green coloring typical of most Indian chess sets, and conjure up images of village life rather than warfare. As suggested by Michael Mark, the set was likely used for actual play, contrary to many John Company sets which were solely used for display.¹⁵



Fig. 8. Panswa (pansi) boat. Colored etching by Frans Balthazar Solvyns. Reproduced from Solvyns 1808-12: III, pl. 5. / 8026

The boats in the second set have neither pavilions nor animal heads, but carry a shrine between the two oarsmen (fig. 11 / 0678). The foot-soldiers are kneeling with a shield in one hand and a sword in the other, as are the larger generals which take the place of queens. The knights and bishops are represented by horses and elephants with a single rider each, while the king is represented by two elephants side by side with a shared howdah across their backs. One side, stained red, depicts Hindus with turbans and curved swords, while the other, left natural white, depicts Muslims with *topis*, or skullcaps, and short, pointed swords. Curiously, the red side appears to have been stained before the carving was complete. This can be seen from line tracings of various details which only appear fully carved

¹⁴ See Deleche 1991.
¹⁵ Mark 1997: 98-23.

Overview of Antique Indian Chess Sets For Export, but Not Only

Ulrich Schäfer

In his groundbreaking work 'Historia shahiludii' (History of Chess), the first volume of 'De ludis orientalibus' (On Oriental Games) published in 1694, Thomas Hyde, Librarian of the Bodleian Library and a Professor of Hebrew and Arabic, presented and illustrated four chess sets from India (Fig. 1 / 8014). The first one is a set made from the wood of the toothbrush tree (*Sabodora persica*), Hyde calls 'Indo-Persian', while nowadays chess sets like this are usually called being of 'Muslim type'. It was his friend John France, who provided this set for him during his stay at Mumbai. France was appointed chaplain at Surat (Gujarat, north of Mumbai) or Mumbai by the British East India Company (EIC) on 23 Feb. 1672, not at least on Hyde's recommendation. Since France, as Hyde tells us, died in 1677, when he drowned in a river, the chess sets must date from before this tragic event.

The three other sets, together with an exquisite chess board (described on p. 59-60) come from the city of Surat, the important harbour of the Mughal Empire north of Mumbai. Here, the EIC had installed their second factory in 1615, while the first factory existed since 1611 at Machilpatnam on the East Coast. In 1616 the Dutch established a factory there as well as the French, who were present from 1667 until 1759. Numerous goods of different type arrived at Surat from all over South-East Asia to be shipped abroad: diamonds, pearls, cotton, silk, musk, spices, indigo, medical plants and many more. Hyde received the games as a gift from Daniel Sheldon, whom Hyde refers to as a merchant (mercator) in the East Indies. Sheldon was member of the EIC since 1658, and factor at Balasore in West-Bengal.



Fig. 1: Indian chess sets illustrated in *De Ludis Orientalibus, Historia shahiludii*, Thomas Hyde, 1694, pages 134-135. / 8014

asking players to handle them in a state of impurity would likely be deemed offensive by many practising Hindus, and not even bothering to represent them correctly would only be adding injury to insult.

The first set installs Krishna as king in his well-known pose with legs crossed and a flute to his lips (fig. 9 / 0690). Krishna is among the most beloved of Vishnu's ten primary avatars, which, as we shall see, also include the celebrated prince Rama and sometimes even the Buddha. The natural queen to Krishna's king would be his consort Radha, but in this set her place is taken by Saraswati, the consort of the creator god Brahma. Considering that Krishna is depicted in his flute-playing pose, it is possible that the choice of Saraswati was occasioned by the *srina*, or lute, that she plays as the goddess of not only learning but also the arts. The bishops are even more mysterious with their loin-cloths and unnatural poses which seem to mirror that of Krishna. Standing next to Krishna and Saraswati, they might be seen as dancers swaying blithely to the divine music, but their half-naked bodies, bundled-up hair, and *rudraksha* necklaces made of dried seeds would rather seem to identify them as holy men in yogic postures (fig. 10 / 8037). Perhaps more obviously than any other pieces found in the deity sets discussed here, they appear to have been deliberately transferred from one context to another.

The knights are depicted as Kalki, the tenth and final avatar of Vishnu, who is prophesied to appear on a white horse with a flaming sword at the end of the current Kali Yuga, or age of darkness, and usher in a new Satya Yuga, or age of truth. While choosing the horse-headed Kalki to fill the role of the knight makes sense from a purely aesthetic perspective, it does little to preserve the already compromised thematic integrity. The same is true of the rooks, which take on the form of Ganesha, the elephant-headed son of the divine couple Shiva and Parvati, sitting under a parasol with his lower right hand raised in a gesture of *abhaya*, offering protection and dispelling all fears. It is easy to see how the compact form of the figure would have suggested itself as a rook, but the only thing linking Ganesha with the rest of the figures is his status as a deity. While the major pieces are identical on both sides, except that one side is stained green, the pawns are differentiated between them. The green side shows eight identical instantiations of Vishnu's avatar Parashurama, or Rama with the axe, who is often associated with aggression and warfare. The natural ivory side supplements the king piece with eight additional incarnations of Krishna, though smaller in size and standing fully erect without the flute.



Fig. 10. Illustration of yogic postures from a manuscript of the *Shriyattavindila* attributed to Mahārāja Krishnaraja Wodeyar III, Mysore, mid-19th century. Reproduced from Sijman 1999: pl. 10. / 8037

Before page Fund Memories This beautiful Hindu set, in green and natural ivory, also has very unusual pieces, such as several Hindu gods, and in particular the rooks as 'dressed elephants under a sun shade.' I bought it from Garrick Coleman in 2014. / 0690

Fig. 9: Southern India set, 19th century. Photo by Franco Maria Ricci. © Antonio Ferra-Oviedo. / 0690

Sample Pages

